

WORKING WITH HERBS – THE BASICS

Here is an easy to read cheat sheet to get you started using herbal medicine!

Purchasing herbs

- Know and trust your supplier
- Make sure the herbs smell fresh and their aroma is intense
- Make sure they look vibrant and deep in color
- Look for organically grown

Preparing your own herbs

- You know where they came from
- You know how they have been handled
- You know how fresh they are
- You can infuse your own energy into them

Gathering your own herbs

- **Make sure you have positive ID of the plant!**
- Know which part of the plant you need
- Know when that part of the plant has the most energy
- Be gentle, with the plant and the environment
- Avoid roadsides, railroad tracks, industrial areas, any area that could be contaminated, etc

Gathering Aerial Parts

- Spring and summer are usually the best times
- If picking leaves, gather just before plant blooms
- If gathering flowers, right before they are fully open is best
- Gather late morning after a dry spell of a few days

Gathering Seeds and Fruits

- Gather seeds when mature, but not so dry they shatter
- Place paper bag around seed head to catch seeds
- Harvest fruit when fully ripe, unless otherwise indicated
- Harvest in dry weather

Gathering Bark

- The inner bark is the medicinal part of the bark (the cambium layer)
- Branches the size of a half dollar or smaller are good to use
- Do not take trunk bark
- It is important to get bark off the branch before it dries
- Harvest in spring through summer until leaves turn
- Harvesting windfall branches right after a storm is often the best option

Gathering Roots

- Harvest when the root is acting as a storage organ- fall/winter/early spring
- This can make ID difficult, since the plant has died back, so be careful and make sure you have positive identification
- Waiting until rains begin can make digging easier
- Long-lived perennials (ex. Echinacea, ginseng) are not harvested until after 3rd, or more, year of growth
- Biennials, such as burdock, harvest in the fall of 1st year or early spring of 2nd year

How to store herbs

- Drying Herbs - make sure herbs are completely dry before storing: hanging in bunches in a dry area out of direct sun, laying on drying screens with plenty of air circulation, or using a dehydrator on the lowest setting
- Storing –herbs will last longer if they are kept in a place that is cool and dark, and in an air-tight container.
- Avoid – to keep your herbs in good shape for a long period of time, avoid: light, heat, air, moisture and insects.
- Label with date of harvest and name and check often to make sure herbs are still in good condition.

Herbal applications

- **Teas/tisanes** -
 1. Infusions - steeped in water for +/- 20 minutes, strained and drunk. Good for leaves and flowers
 2. Decoctions - simmered in boiling water for +/- 20 minutes, strained and drunk. Good for seeds, barks and roots
 3. Fomentations – the act of applying a tea externally turns it into a fomentation, which can be applied by soaking a cloth in the tea and applying it to the skin, or spraying on.
- **Steam Inhalations** - Take a steaming cup or bowl of tea and place your face 10-12 inches above, in the path of the steam so that it can be breathed in. Tenting your head with a towel can increase the effectiveness.
- **Poultices** - Apply mashed up, torn up or water soaked herbs externally onto the skin.
- **Tinctures/extracts** -
 1. Soak the herb in liquid for a length of time. This is called Macerating the Herb in the Menstruum (macerate = soak, herb = herb, menstruum = liquid)
 2. The menstruum (liquid) used is generally alcohol, alcohol and water, vinegar or glycerine.
 3. Tinctures can be used internally or externally
- **Infused Oils** -
 1. To make an infused oil, the herb is soaked in an oil for a length of time, similar to how a tincture is made.
 2. There is a big difference between infused and essential oils. Essential oils are a component of many plants, which are extracted, concentrated and extremely potent, needing to be diluted before use. Herbal infused oils are gentle and many different oil soluble components of the plant are extracted into them.
 3. Precautions with fresh herbs - fresh herbs contain a lot of moisture, which may cause the oil infusion to mold. It is best to use dry herbs or herbs that have been wilted for a couple of days.
 4. Salves and Lotions - herbal infused oils are perfect for creating products like salves, balms and lotions

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